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ABSTRACT

This digest links the development of listening comprehension to the emerging reading comprehension of young American Indian students, and suggests ways that teachers can use locally produced materials to enhance young students' emergent literacy. Reading comprehension is the key to literacy, and prior knowledge supports listening and reading comprehension. However, most commercial reading materials used in schools do not reflect American Indian students' exprience of the world. Since there are many culturally distinct American Indian groups, producing commercial "Indian" materials is not a viable alternative. Studies have shown, however, that culturally relevant instructional materials increased listening comprhension among American Indian primary students. Such findings indicate the effectiveness of teachers' efforts to produce instructional materials locally. Such efforts might involve inviting community storytellers into the classroom and transcribing oral presentations for use as reading materials, or encouraging children to develop stories based on their own experiences. Teachers must also recognize the linguistic diversity of their students, who may use English as first language, second language, or dialect. Students' linguistic backgrounds must be considered when designing a language arts program. This digest contains 10 references. (SV)

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ERIC DIGEST

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Supporting Emergent Literacy Among Young American Indian Students

Digest EDO-RC-90-3

LITERACY STARTS TO EMERGE long before children begin school. Young children—including Indian students—learn from those around them who read and write, by having stories read to them, and by having access to writing materials for experimenting with print.

McCormick and Mason (1986) studied emergent literacy (the development of literacy in young children) in low-income homes. These children wrote less and entered school with less experience in reading and writing than middle-class children. Such findings may be significant for Indian children entering school, since poverty is an enduring feature of many Indian communities.

What happens later, in traditional school programs, however, may be more important. Reeves (1989) concludes that (1) Indians have the highest dropout rates of any racial or ethnic group and (2) they are more likely than other groups to be labeled handicapped or learning disabled. In the traditional North American school, Indian students apparently confront serious academic dilemmas. Perhaps what happens in school explains why these children generally fall further and further behind in the development of literacy (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1988).

These facts are well known; the question is what teachers can do, especially to improve mastery of the written word by Indian students. There is no more logical place to start than the education of young children. This Digest links the development of listening comprehension to the emerging reading comprehension of young Indian students. It suggests ways teachers can develop instructional routines that incorporate locally produced materials to enhance young students' emergent literacy. Finally, it synthesizes three principles to guide such work.

Reading comprehension and Indian students

Reading comprehension is perhaps the key to literacy. The importance of background knowledge for successful reading comprehension has become an accepted principle in reading instruction (for example, Hayes & Tierney, 1982). As schools are now structured, comprehending written material can be a major challenge for Indian students. It is especially challenging for those whose native language is not the language of instruction (Reyhner, 1988). Obviously, the commerical reading materials traditionally used in schools do not reflect Indian students' experience of the world.

Research in schema theory (for example, Rumelhart, 1980) suggests that prior knowledge supports comprehension. It must be brought into play both before and during reading. When students lack relevant prior knowledge, teachers must either supply it or accept flawed comprehension. The latter alternative, of course, is not professionally responsible.

Hall (1987) recommends that the early childhood language arts program (1) view the emergence of literacy as a continuous process and (2) provide ample time for discussion and reflection. These recommendations support use of the techniques of "whole language" learning. In this approach Indian children, like all others, need to be involved in experiences that use language that is meaningful to them. Turner (1989, p. 283) notes, "If one believes that vocabulary size and depth of reading comprehension are at the heart of literacy....then one would be correct in taking the position that systematic phonics contributes little, if anything, to literacy."

Culturally relevant materials that support emergent literacy

There are direct implications for programs that serve Indian students. Culturally relevant materials can provide the critical link between prior knowledge and texts that students read. Such materials are absolutely essential if Indian children are to succeed early in their progress toward literacy (Reyhner, 1988). Comparatively few such commercial materials are available to teachers of Indian students, however. There are many distinct Indian cultural groups, and what is culturally relevant to one group is not necessarily appropriate for another. The culture of the Haida on the Queen Charlotte Islands of British Columbia, for example, is vastly different from the cultures of the Sioux (on the prairies in the United States) or the Cree (on the prairies in Canada). Hence, to offer generic, commercially produced, "Indian" materials is not an alternative.

There are solutions, however. Teachers, for example, generally acknowledge the close links among the four strands of the language arts—reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Listening comprehension is, in fact, one route to help improve reading comprehension among Indian students. One study (McEachern & Luther, in press) examined the effect of culturally relevant materials on listening comprehension among a group of seven- and eight-year-old Indian children in northern Alberta. English was a second language among these children. The culturally relevant materials yielded higher listening comprehension scores when two stories—one story from a commercially published language arts program, and the other a culturally relevant story written expressly for Indian children—were read to the students. This finding is meaningful, considering (1) the importance of background knowledge, and (2) the links between listening and reading comprehension.

A further illustration might clarify this point. In a kindergarten class in the same community, the children were listening to "Old Macdonald Had a Farm." In addition to their comparatively limited English language proficiency, these children had great difficulty understanding the basic vocabulary. Farms and farm animals were simply unknown to them. If it had been "a moose in the woods" rather than "a cow on the farm," the students would have understood better.

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Such findings strongly suggest that continuing efforts to produce instructional materials locally are warranted. They also suggest that efforts to include the local community in storytelling make a great deal of sense. In most Indian communities storytellers would be glad to visit classrooms. Their stories hold the children's interest more than some of the stories that appear in commercially produced English language books. Such efforts will inevitably help improve listening comprehension.

At the same time, successful experiences in listening comprehension must be linked with improved reading comprehension. Provisions must be made to record, in writing, the presentations of culturally relevant stories delivered orally. This step is crucial for accumulating a reservoir of locally produced reading material. It takes substantial work, but in this way, the stories will be preserved and can be read by classroom teachers to the children. Later, the children will be able to read the stories themselves.

Finally, teachers must use a variety of approaches with young children. For example, children can develop their own stories. They can imitate the models provided by storytellers, or they can develop stories based on their own experiences. Such techniques can be applied both to stories in English and to stories in Indian languages. Depending on the resources of the school, moreover, stories can be translated from one language to another. These techniques have advantages for Indian students. Not only can they promote successful reading comprehension, but they can preserve and extend local traditions in an educational context. This work is important in any educational setting, but it is of the essence in Indian education.

Linguistic diversity

There is no simple way to make reading and writing meaningful activities for the diverse population of Indian students. Not only do Indian cultures differ substantially from one another, but great diversity in English language proficiency characterizes native communities (Morrow, 1988). In some, children come to school with English as their first language, while in others English is a second language or dialect.

Teachers must take this linguistic background into consideration when designing a language arts program. If students begin school with English as a second language, for example, teachers should focus on oral language that reflects local culture. If students use English dialects that vary from standard English, teachers must strive to avoid negative comparisons of the dialect with standard English.

In a school in which the author worked, for example, a teacher prepared charts with one column containing phrases based on "community language" and another containing phrases based on "school language." The children had little difficulty distinguishing between the two categories, and the teacher never indicated that one list was "better" than the other. This approach, used consistently and reflected in everyday interactions with students, should help to make school a more hospitable place for Indian children.

Conclusion

What, then, are the essential principles for supporting the emergent literacy of young Indian students? First, language arts programs must incorporate the linguistic background, prior knowledge, and experiences of Indian students to support the key function of comprehension. Second, the links among the strands of the language arts must be actively nurtured, so that improvement in one strand carries over into another. Teachers need to develop explicit techniques (such as those illustrated above) to make the links part of the daily instructional routine. Finally, teachers must be caring individuals, respectful of both their students and the community of which they and their students are a part. These principles can help teachers validate their students' lived experiences to bring about learning and to empower young Indian students' emergent literacy.

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